

THE GREAT NORTHERN CONSPIRACY

“O. S. L.”

Every one knows how great an influence was exercised by the “Knights of the Golden Circle” in preparing and organizing the Southern rebellion. The efficacy of secret orders, bound to implicit obedience and working in darkness, was thus established, and those who found in them a means of accomplishing their ends and gratifying their ambition, were not disposed to abandon so powerful an instrument. The “Golden Circle” had many lodges throughout the North and the loyal Border States. These continued in existence, but their active sympathy with rebellion gradually attracted attention, and rendered them dangerous to their members. To divert suspicion, various changes were adopted in the nomenclature and ritual of the Order. Stirling Price, who was at its head in Missouri, reorganized it in that State as the “Corps de Belgique”—a name selected apparently in honor of Charles L. Hunt, Belgian Consul at St. Louis, his principal assistant, whose treasonable disloyalty has resulted in his arrest and confession.

A similar plan was adopted throughout the Free States. About a year since the Order was reorganized on a wider scale under the title of the “Order of American Knights,” by a knot of Southern sympathizers, the principal of whom were Clement L. Vallandigham and Peter C. Wright. The latter

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was editor of the New York *Daily News*, and was the first Supreme Commander of the Order. In May last he was arrested and imprisoned in Fort Lafayette. The developments at St. Louis concerning the Order, about that time, and the consequent arrests, alarmed the leaders, who made a further change in the hope of concealment. It was rebaptized as the "Order of the Sons of Liberty;" some changes were made in the signs and ritual, and Vallandigham, who had been elected Supreme Commander, February 22d, 1864, retained the Supreme Commandership.

Corresponding changes were made in the Southern branch of the Order. The "Golden Circle" and the "Corps de Belgique" were merged, first into the "American Knights" and then into the "Sons of Liberty." Stirling Price is Supreme Commander in the South, as Vallandigham is in the North, and correspondence is regularly maintained between them.¹

The Objects of the "Sons of Liberty."

Among the captured correspondence of Jefferson Davis, there was found a letter to him from Franklin Pierce, who, under date of January 7th, 1860, assured his "dear friend" that in the event of a war between the North and South, the Abolitionists would "find occupation enough at home," for "the fighting will not be along Mason and Dixon's line alone. It will be within our own borders, in our own streets, between the two classes of citizens (Republicans and Democrats) to whom I have referred." When this letter saw the light, we forgave the villainousness of the prophecy on account of its apparent futility. Ex-President Pierce knew more than we did. He knew the existence of a deep feeling of sympathy with the South, and though he exaggerated its boldness, he only did justice to its malignity. The proof of this is to be found in the objects professed by the "O. S. L." or, "Order of the Sons of Liberty."

¹ Startling as this may seem, it is not mere assertion. The fact was testified to by one of the emissaries employed, and the route habitually adopted by the messengers was detailed at length.

The printed ritual of that Order, and of its predecessor, the "O. A. K.," or "Order of American Knights," are nearly identical. Several hundred copies of them were discovered in the office of the Hon. Daniel S. Voorhees, at Terre Haute, Ind., together with a mass of correspondence relative to those Orders. Other copies were found secreted in matresses in the house of Dr. Kalfus, of Louisville, and in the building occupied by H. H. Dodd, the Grand Commander of the Order in Indiana.

The ritual commences with a "Declaration of Principles." These principles consist of two—the advocacy of slavery as a necessity in the order of nature, and the assertion of the right of secession by the States of the Union. The former is only interesting as showing the animus of the Order; the latter is the practical doctrine, to the vindication of which the energies of the affiliated are to be directed, as will be seen by the following extract:

"The Government designated the 'United States of America,' has no *sovereignty* because that is an attribute with which the people, in their several and distinct political organizations, are endowed, and is inalienable. . . . In accordance with the principles upon which is founded the *American theory*, Government can exercise only delegated power; hence, if those who shall have been chosen to administer the Government shall assume to exercise powers not delegated, they should be regarded and treated as *usurpers*. The references to 'inherent power,' 'war power,' or 'military necessity' on the part of the functionary for the sanction of an arbitrary exercise of power by him, we will not accept in palliation or excuse. . . . It is incompatible with the history and nature of our system of government that Federal authority should coerce by arms a sovereign State."

These premises being granted, the chiefs of the Order become the sole and irresponsible judges of what shall be regarded as an arbitrary exercise of prerogative by the Government, and when they have so decided, the sworn obedience of the Order compels all members to rise in armed hostility at their bidding. The motto of the Order, introduced by Vallandigham, is "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God," and what is the practical purport of this will be seen by the

obligation assumed by all who enter the Order. The ritual declares that

“ Whenever the chosen officers or delegates shall fail or refuse to administer the Government in strict accordance with the letter of the accepted Constitution, it is the inherent right and the solemn and imperative duty of the people to *resist* the functionaries, and if need be, to *expel them by force of arms*! Such resistance is not revolution, but is solely the exertion of right—the exercise of all the noble attributes which impart honor and dignity to manhood.”

And in the oath or obligation assumed by the neophyte on taking the first degree, there occurs the following :

“ I do further promise that I will at all times, if needs be, take up arms in the cause of the oppressed—of my country first of all—against any monarch, prince, power or government, which may be found in arms against a people or peoples who are endeavoring to establish or have inaugurated a government for themselves, of their free choice, in accordance with or founded on the eternal principles of truth, which I have first sworn on the Vestibule, and now in this presence do swear to maintain inviolate and defend with my life; this I do promise without reservation or evasion of mind, without regard to the name, station, condition or designation of the invading or coercing power, whether it shall arise from within or without. All this I do solemnly promise and swear sacredly to observe, perform and keep, with a full knowledge and understanding, and with my full assent that the penalty which will follow a violation of any or either of these most solemn vows shall be a sudden and shameful death, while my name shall be consigned to infamy, while this sublime Order shall survive the wrecks of time, and even until the last faithful brother shall have passed from earth to his service in the temple not made with hands.”¹

Not only was the unfaithful member thus threatened with a “shameful death,” and that his body should be divided into four parts and cast out at the four gates of the temple, but he

¹ From the testimony of William Clayton, who took the first degree of the O. A. K., in July, 1863, and rose to the third degree of that and its successor, the O. S. L. The same oath is contained in the ritual of the latter, as quoted by Judge Holt in his report.

was further taught that this oath of fidelity to the Order was superior to any other oaths which he might take. The oath of allegiance to the United States was trivial in comparison. In an examination under oath, he was to perjure himself rather than reveal any of the secrets of the Order, as was fully shown by the trial and subsequent confessions of Hunt, Dunn and Smith, chiefs of the Order in Missouri.

Such being the objects and theory of the Order, it is easy to understand the current belief among the members that Jefferson Davis belonged to it, and that the programme of its action had been settled between him and Vallandigham, during the latter's residence in Richmond.

Plans of the Order.

As the object of the "O. S. L." is to assist the rebellion and to resist its "coercion" by the Government in every possible manner, no labor for that purpose has been too mean or too great for its efforts. It would take too much space to recount all that has been developed in the various trials which have taken place. Information of contemplated movements conveyed to rebel generals; instructions as to the points where raids could be safely made; coöperation with guerillas throughout Kentucky and Missouri; conveyance of military stores, ammunition, percussion caps and medicines through the lines; raising recruits for the rebel armies, thousands of whom have been collected and forwarded from Louisville and St. Louis; encouragement of desertions from the national forces, harboring and protecting deserters, assisting them to escape and resisting their arrest; discouragement of enlistments—any member who volunteers is therefore expelled;—resistance to enrolment and draft; murdering enrolment officers, provost marshals and others in the United States service; running trains of Union troops off the track; destruction of government property, arsenals, stores, steamers, &c. &c., all these are the tasks which have been allotted to the lower degrees of the Order, as have been proved in the numerous trials which have taken place; and the history of the war in the West,

where the Order principally flourishes, shows how great has been its industry and success.

Wicked as all this is, it is, however, of comparatively minor importance. The fourth and fifth degrees, the Grand Council of each State, and the Supreme Council with Vallandigham at its head, have long revolved projects of infinitely greater magnitude. Their object has been to bring the war to an end by dismembering the North. Missouri and Kentucky were to be thrown irretrievably into the hands of the rebels. A revolt in the North-west was to paralyze the Government; a North-western Confederacy was to be framed, which, in alliance or fused with the South, was to dictate terms of settlement to the remaining States.

This audacious plan may seem incredible, but it rests on apparently irrefragable testimony. High dignitaries of the Order have been arrested, and their confessions accord with the papers which have been seized, and these correspond with the preparations which have been made in the various lodges or temples throughout the West.

The key-note of all this is to be found in the address to the Order, issued by H. H. Dodd, grand commander of Indiana, last February, in which he quotes the views of the supreme commander, Vallandigham:

“ He (Vallandigham) judges that the Washington power will not yield up its power until it is taken from them by an indignant people, by force of arms.”

How the dismemberment of the Union was to be accomplished.

At Dodd’s trial, at Indianapolis, Sept. 27 and 30, Felix G. Stidger, grand secretary of the Order in Kentucky, testified that the rebels under Price were expected to invade Missouri with 20,000 men, while Buckner or Breckenridge should enter Kentucky with such forces as they could bring. The Order in Indiana, Ohio and Illinois was to rise. The Government arsenals and stores were to be seized, the prisoners at Johnson’s Island, Camp Douglas, Rock Island, &c., were to be liberated and armed with the weapons from the arsenals.

Large bodies of men were thus to be thrown into Missouri and Kentucky, the mass of whose inhabitants, led by the Order in those States, were expected to join them, and the authority of the Government throughout the West and the North-west was to be destroyed. Seven regiments of Forrest's men had been disbanded during his raid into Western Kentucky last spring, and left there to coöperate. Captain Hines, of Morgan's staff, who had been captured with Morgan and escaped with him, was on Vallandigham's staff, who had detailed him to superintend the liberation of the Johnson Island prisoners. A Dr. Bowles, Major General of the Order in Indiana, was entrusted by Vallandigham with a similar duty at Rock Island.

The time originally fixed for the enterprise was June 15 or 17. The coöperation of the rebel armies was however wanting, and it was postponed. The middle of August was then designated. From other sources it appears that Dodd and J. C. Walker met the pseudo rebel commissioners at Niagara, and arranged the details. The Democratic State Central Committee of Indiana, however, condemned the scheme as madness at that time. The aspects of the war, too, just then were not reassuring. Sherman was at the gates of Atlanta, Grant was thundering at Petersburg, and Early's raid on Washington had come to naught. Another postponement was agreed on. A few days afterward information was obtained which led to the seizure of large amounts of arms and ammunition prepared for the operation; the leading spirit in Indiana, H. H. Dodd, was arrested, and the whole scheme made public. Thus when Price, in fulfillment of his part of the plan, invaded Missouri in September, the promised aid was wanting.

Organization and Strength of the Order.

These plots may seem the creation of distempered brains, and utterly beyond the reach of such a body as the "O. S. L." to accomplish. The conspirators, it is true, are crazed in their reckless hate of the Government and frenzied lust of power, but yet they have shown method in their madness, and

have not wholly miscalculated the means adapted to their ends.

The organization of the Order is military throughout. The members of each "Temple" form a company; those of each county a regiment, whose chief officer is called its colonel; each congressional district constitutes a brigade, under command of a brigadier general; while in each military district, these are consolidated under the control of a major general. By the secret constitution of the Order, (sect. 8,) the grand commander of each state "shall be commander-in-chief of the military forces of their respective states," while the supreme commander "shall be commander-in-chief of all military forces belonging to the Order in the various states, when called into actual service." From the acolyte in the vestibule to the supreme council, with its chief, Vallandigham, every man is sworn to blind and implicit obedience to the orders of his superior. The two active duties most constantly enjoined upon members are the procuring of arms and the practice of drill. The members of every temple are regularly drilled, and the most strenuous exertions have been made to procure a full supply of arms. Clayton, a member of the third degree, testified that about two-thirds of the members were armed, and it was in evidence that in March last the Order in Indiana possessed 6,000 muskets and 60,000 revolvers, besides private arms. General Carrington estimates that in February and March last nearly 30,000 guns and revolvers were brought by it into Indiana, and after the orders of last March prohibiting the introduction of arms into the Department of the North, the Government made a seizure of a large quantity of revolvers and 130,000 rounds of ammunition consigned to Dodd, the grand commander.¹ As long ago as August, 1863, a correspondence took place between Senator Wall of New Jersey, and the Hon. Mr. Voorhies of Indiana, respecting 20,000 rifles which E. W. Carr of Philadelphia had for sale. Mr. Wall vouched for the excellence of the weapons, and the object of the negotiation is

¹ Dodd is a bookbinder, and occupies part of the building of the Indianapolis *Sentinel*. The boxes of arms and ammunition were found concealed in the pressroom and wareroom. In the bills of lading under which they were shipped in New York, they were described as "stationery."

inexplicable unless they were wanted for the purposes of the Order. Arrangements were made with the rebel authorities by which arms were shipped from Nassau through Canada, on the payment of the costs of transportation by the Order, and no stone was left unturned to elude the vigilance of the Government in the effort to supply all the members with the means of offence and defence.

It is not easy to ascertain the exact numbers of the drilled, disciplined, and well equipped army which was thus set on foot. At the meeting of the grand council held in February last, it was represented to amount to 800,000 or 1,000,000 men, but this is manifestly an exaggeration. Vallandigham, in his Dayton speech of last summer, asserted it to be 500,000. In March last, the entire armed force of the Order, capable of mobilization for active service, was stated at 340,000. Estimates of its strength in the various states differ as greatly, even when made by officers high in degree. Thus the Order in Illinois is stated to comprise from 100,000 to 160,000 members; in Indiana, from 75,000 to 125,000; in Missouri, from 20,000 to 40,000; in Kentucky, from 40,000 to 70,000; in Ohio, from 80,000 to 108,000; in Michigan and New York, about 20,000 each.

Even at the lowest of these figures, and allowing for the exaggerations adopted to magnify its power and impose upon the ignorant and credulous, it will be seen that the Order is not a mere bugbear, and that the audacious plans of its leaders were not devoid of a reasonable prospect of success. Had they succeeded in evading the vigilance of the Government, which for months was watching their every move, had the promised coöperation of the rebels been afforded, and had they succeeded in liberating the prisoners in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, it is fearful to think of the anarchy which they might have wrought. Our armies in the field would probably have been destroyed, and our Government rent into fragments.

That all this was contemplated by the conspirators, does not rest simply upon the testimony of the witnesses for the prosecution, direct and convincing as that was, and unshaken upon cross-examination. The flight of Dodd during his trial, in violation of his parole, is a full confession of guilt.

Extent and Affiliations of the Order.

It has been seen that the "O. S. L." exists throughout the South, but this is a matter of little importance, except in so far as it supplies the rebels with spies and messengers who are sure of protection and assistance as soon as they reach our lines. Its ramifications throughout the North are of much higher interest.

Besides the States mentioned above, lodges are officially reported to exist in New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland. Other organizations, also, of a kindred nature, are affiliated with it. The disturbances in the coal region of Pennsylvania originated in a similar Order, claiming relationship through their common parent, the "Knights of the Golden Circle." In New York, the body known as the "McClellan Minute Guard" is also a branch. Dr. R. F. Stevens, the Chief Secretary of the "Guard" is the most active representative of the "O. S. L." It is organized upon a military basis like the parent Order, and is under the command of "brigadier generals" and a "commander-in-chief," while the members are subjected to rigid obedience to their officers. As Dr. Stevens stated to a witness whose evidence is furnished—"those who represent the McClellan interest are compelled to preach a vigorous prosecution of the war, in order to secure the popular sentiment and allure voters."

This deception exists on all sides. The Order never could have attained its present proportions had its objects been known to those who sought its membership. Democrats whose feelings were opposed to the war or who regarded the draft with aversion were invited to join a Democratic political organization. Once in they could not escape. Bound by the fearful oath of initiation, threatened with the awful penalties to be visited on unfaithful members, and reduced to implicit obedience to their superiors, they became the helpless tools of the designing men who controlled the Order, and thus a power of formidable proportions was cunningly built up.

Connection of the Order with the Democratic Party.

The danger of the great North-western Conspiracy as designed last summer is over. It never was great, for the vigilance of the government anticipated every movement of the conspirators, and the success of the campaigns of Georgia and Virginia deprived them of their main reliance in the active coöperation of the rebels.

The danger of the future lies in the coöperation of the "O. S. L." with the Democratic party. The former is contained within the latter, and though the organizations may as yet be independent, still there is ample proof that they are working in harmony with each other, and that there is a perfect understanding between their respective leaders. In fact, the Democratic party evidently regards the "O. S. L." as a useful instrument to effect its purposes.

The Party did not approve of the violent means contemplated by the Order in August, and procured the postponement of the outbreak. In fact, such an outbreak, on the eve of the Chicago Convention, would have been a political blunder of the worst description. It was much better to hold the convention quietly, to nominate candidates, to conduct the canvass which at that time had every promise of success. If the Party triumphed at the polls, it was master of the situation, and the "O. S. L." became superfluous. If, on the other hand, Abraham Lincoln should be reëlected by the people, then the Order became an instrument of inestimable value in the dark schemes entertained by the managers of the Chicago Convention.

Two passages in the Chicago Platform show the intimate sympathy and correlation between the Order and the Party. The first of these is retrospective. It arraigns the Administration for its "interference with and denial of the right of the people to bear arms," which it threatens will prevent "the perpetuation of a government deriving its just powers from the consent of the governed." This necessarily refers to the measures adopted by Government to prevent the arming of the Order, and the presentation of such a complaint by the Party, shows how little necessity there was felt of concealing the connection and sympathy between the two organizations.

The other passage is prospective in its application. It is the third resolution which, after complaining of military interference with elections as "a shameful violation of the Constitution," threatens that "the repetition of such acts at the approaching election will be held as revolutionary, and resisted with all the means and power under our control."

Thus the Order was withheld in August, for the time had not yet come, but it was promised full swing in November, if a Democratic victory did not render its functions superfluous.

Vallandigham, the Supreme Commander of the Order, was the author of the Platform, and the chief manager of the Convention. The Supreme Council of the Order, which, at its annual meeting in New York, February 22d, had adjourned to meet in July, at Chicago, at the same time as the Convention, postponed its meeting when the Convention was postponed, and actually held its session the day before the Convention met. The two bodies coöperated harmoniously, and evidently united their forces for the common object.¹ That nothing might be wanting to ensure the full committal of the Democratic party to the plot there agreed upon, the Convention did not dissolve at its adjournment, but took the unprecedented step of constituting itself a permanent body., Governor Wickliffe, of Kentucky, who has three sons in the rebel army, stated that "circumstances may occur between this and the 4th of March, that will make it necessary for the great mass of the Democracy of this country to be reassembled." He, therefore,

¹ The identity of policy and action is curiously shown in the fact that the recommendation by the Convention of a "cessation of hostilities, with a view to an ultimate convention of all the States," is borrowed almost literally from a series of resolutions adopted by the Grand Council of the Order in Indiana, at a meeting held at Indianapolis, February 16th, 1864. The fifth resolution reads :

"5. That whatever the theory of the powers of the Federal Government to coerce a State to remain in the Union may be, war as a means of restoring the Union is a delusion, involving a fearful waste of human life, hopeless bankruptcy, and the speedy downfall of the Republic. Therefore we recommend a cessation of hostilities upon existing facts, and a convention of the sovereign States to adjust the terms of a peace with a view to the restoration of the Union, entire if possible; if not, so much and such parts as the affinities of interests and civilization may attract."

The proceedings of this meeting were found in the safe of Dodd, the Grand Commander of Indiana.

offered the following resolution, which was unanimously adopted :

"Resolved, That the Convention shall not be dissolved by the adjournment at the close of its business, but shall remain as organized, subject to be called together at any time and place that the Executive National Committee shall designate."

What are the "circumstances" contemplated by the Convention as probably requiring its action between August 31st and March 4th, has not been distinctly avowed. The Convention has no legal status and can take no legal action on any national or public question. Its reassembling for such a purpose is simply revolutionary, and can have no other interpretation. But we are not left entirely in the dark as to the objects proposed.

When the Convention adjourned, there was every prospect that its ticket would be successful, yet there was a chance of its defeat. The Platform assumed that such defeat could only arise from military interference with the election, and threatened revolution in such case. With every day since August 31st, the prospects of McClellan and Pendleton have grown less, until now their chances of legitimate election rest solely on some overwhelming disaster to our arms before the 8th of November. The means to inaugurate the threatened revolution were provided by the prudent care of Governor Wickliffe's resolution. The waning hopes of the Party show that those means will probably have to be employed for that purpose, and already we see evidence that the Order and the Party are preparing for it, and are endeavoring to train the popular mind in that direction.

The official organ of the Order is the New York *Daily News*, whose late editor was Vallandigham's predecessor in the Supreme Commandership. The *News* of October 10th, has the following exhortation, the purport of which will scarcely be misinterpreted by the reader who knows its connection with the Order, and who recollects the motto selected for the Order by Mr. Vallandigham :

"The sun is not more certain to rise to-morrow, than that the President of these United States for the next four years

will be Abraham Lincoln! . . . The last refuge and hope of law, order and Constitutional Government trampled under foot, it becomes the bounden duty of every man among us who would be free, to look, like our Revolutionary fathers, to the remedy of his own right-hand; and, standing on his constitutional rights, to declare in the face of bastile or banishment, or still better, in the very front of hurtling battle, that 'RESISTANCE TO TYRANTS IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD.' "

As if to show their entire unity of purpose, on the very day on which the organ of the Order uttered these significant threats, the Democratic National Committee, the organ of the Party, put forth an Address, in which the same incendiary design was veiled in less crude and brutal words. The pretext for the Address was the suspension of a newspaper in Baltimore, and the adoption of a test oath by a Convention in Tennessee; and after endeavoring to inflame the people to resist the tyranny of the Administration, the Committee conclude with the scarcely covert threat—

"They believe that the American people, armed with the majestic authority of the Constitution and the laws, will meet these beginnings of usurpation in the spirit and with the determination of their fathers; nor suffer Executive ambition so far to corrupt the constitutional remedies of Executive wrong-doing as to *condemn this great and free people in the immediate future to the condition of the remedies of the subject populations of the olden world.*"

Frightened as the writer evidently was with the idea which he has clothed with this mass of verbiage, still the idea is as plainly to be seen there as in the bolder phrase of the other organ. "If we cannot change the Administration by votes, we will do it with bayonets"—or, to use the watchword so significantly repeated at every Democratic meeting and procession, "A free election or a free fight."

Thus the danger in prospect for us in November is more real than that through which we unconsciously passed in August. That was crude, ill-digested, and lacked the support which was a condition precedent to success. This is more dexterously prepared, covers a wider scope, and is managed by far abler men than the Dodds, the Bowles, the Pipers, who fraternized

with guerillas and burned Government steamboats. It aims to raise a whole population in revolt, from the Atlantic to the border of Kansas, and though the attempt would surely be quenched in the blood of the anarchs who wrought the evil, yet it would inflict a blow upon our cause from which it could not recover, and would plunge us into suffering such as we now can but faintly conceive.

The prevention lies in our own hands. An election in which Mr. Lincoln has a slender majority either in the electoral college or on the popular vote will invite the execution of these infernal schemes. An election by a decisive majority, in which the great popular voice shall speak in thunder tones to dis-organizers and rebels, North and South, will confound their plans, and their contrivers will shrink in terror from the manifestation of the mighty popular wrath. Even as Jefferson Davis will cower before that storm in his "last ditch" at Richmond, so will Vallandigham again seek refuge in the congenial regions of Canada, and Auguste Belmont, in the luxurious recesses of his palace, will turn to schemes more profitable than engineering a popular revolution to upset the Government of his adopted country.